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Mitterand protege rides out Greenpeace bomb scandal

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PARIS — Since Aug. 27, when Premier Laurent Fabius cautiously endorsed the Bernard Tricot report absolving the French government of responsibility in the July 10 bombing of the Greenpeace ship, Rainbow Warrior, in New Zealand, Defense Minister Charles Hernu has known that he can keep the post he has held for four years.

For weeks before Mr. Fabius' formal statement, French newspapers and magazines speculated that Mr. Hernu would have to go. He had direct control of France's combined intelligence service, the Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieure, which was implicated in the ship bombing that killed a Portuguese photographer. It was beyond credence that the present head of the DGSE, Vice Adm. Pierre Lacoste, would have authorized blowing up an environmentalist vessel in a foreign port without obtaining approval from his superior.

Less easy to answer was the question: Could Charles Hernu, given his taste for quiet deals and clandestine meetings, have failed to inform his close friend and political mentor, President Francois Mitterrand? Some French newspapers reported that when first confronted with the facts about the Rainbow Warrior bombing, the French president went into a "Homeric" rage and tongue-lashed his defense minister.

There is now reason to suspect that such reports were part of a smokescreen, laid down by the Elysee Palace staff after the scandal broke, to protect Mr. Mitterrand from ultimate responsibility.

Two of Mr. Hernu's character traits have fostered the notion that he might have deceived his boss about the nature of the anti-Greenpeace operation: an impulsiveness and love of mystery.

Born 62 years ago in the Breton port of Quimper, Charles Hernu was brought up in humble circumstances, which may explain his left-wing and Jacobin inclinations. From his father, a gendarme, he inherited a respect for law and order and a sense of patriotic duty.

In 1944, as the Allied armies rolled victoriously across France, Mr. Hernu volunteered, serving as a sergeant with the Free French forces in Germany.

A fervent admirer of Premier Pierre Mendes-France, Mr. Hernu was elected as a Socialist to the Chamber of Deputies in 1956. But, when the Suez crisis exploded that October, he boldly denounced Premier Guy Mollet's Socialist government, which had planned the expedition. Among those whose resignations he demanded was the minister of justice — Francois Mitterrand.

Twenty months later, a graver crisis precipitated by a French military putsch in colonial Algeria, brought Charles de Gaulle to power. Mr. Hernu no less brashly denounced this "anti-democratic coup" — along with his idol, Mr. Mendes-France, and again Mr. Mitterrand. Mr. Mitterrand was impressed by this rugged concern for republican principle. Thus was born a friendship that has lasted to this day.

Mr. Hernu's dogged opposition to Gen. de Gaulle's return to power cost him his parliamentary seat in the November 1958 elections. It was 20 years before he could return to the National Assembly. During those "wilderness years," he made himself an invaluable assistant, helping Mr. Mitterrand found a new, small party of his own before engineering the dramatic coup of 1971, which culminated in Guy Mollet's ouster and the enthronement of a "maverick outsider," Mr. Mitterrand, as the new leader of the French Left.

Unlike so many Socialists who talked of scrapping President de Gaulle's "force de Frappe," Mr. Hernu was convinced that in an uncertain world a strong, independent nuclear strike-force was a necessity for France. Probably no Socialist during the 1970s was more tireless in buttonholing party colleagues in an effort to convince them to see military realities as he did.

Some provisions of the Common Program of 1972, which sought to wed Socialists and Communists into a state of "unholy deadlock," must have struck Mr. Hernu as lunatic — notably one calling for the dissolution of France's main intelligence agency.

Paying no heed to this recommendation, Mr. Hernu formed a small team of experts to consider how the Socialists, if they ever came to power, should tackle questions of intelligence and espionage.

In May 1981, when Francois Mitterrand's Socialists were swept into office with the help of Communist votes, Mr. Hernu was rewarded for his tireless advocacy of a strong defense with the leadership of that ministry.

Many generals in the Defense Ministry cared little for the newcomer, particularly since the government he belonged to included four Communist Party members.

But bit by bit, Mr. Hernu gained the grudging respect of the top brass. He did this with charm — "that's why he's so dangerous," an opposition deputy recently confided — a rugged refusal to let the period of mandatory military service be reduced to less than one year and determination to modernize France's nuclear deterrent and to build a Rapid Action Force. The force, 47,000 strong, is capable of intervening beyond France's borders, particularly in Africa. Most of the top brass now regard him as "the best one can hope for in a Socialist."

Where Mr. Hernu failed was with France's combined intelligence service. To replace the outgoing head of the SDECE, Col. Alexandre de Marenches — an aristocratic professional who during 10 years turned it into one of the most highly regarded intelligence agencies in the world — Mr. Hernu imposed his own candidate: Pierre Marion, a senior Air France official whom the defense chief had befriended at one of his Masonic lodges.

Erratic, opinionated and inexperienced, Mr. Marion proved a disaster, dismissing or alienating some of the SDECE's ablest officers. Instituting a purge of overly conservative officers, he reorganized the various services with such disregard for experience that scores of "honorable correspondents" abroad refused to continue providing the SDECE with free information.

In November 1982, after Gen. Jeannou Lacaze — then chief of staff and formerly deputy head of the SDECE — openly deplored the shambles to which France's intelligence agency had been reduced, Mr. Marion was fired and replaced by Vice Adm. Lacoste, who was instructed to halt the ruinous "demilitarization" of the service and restore order.

Logically, Mr. Hernu, who had fought like a tiger in 1981 to keep the intelligence service under the control of the Defense Ministry, should have left his post with Pierre Marion. Instead, he was retained by his friend President Mitterrand, because there was no other Socialist capable of keeping the top brass reasonably happy.

As a result, the French government is now saddled with an inept, demoralized intelligence agency. No one in the French government has been able to explain why an officially admitted "mission of observation and surveillance" in New Zealand should have been entrusted to four underwater demolition frogmen who apparently were ignorant of elementary espionage procedures.